

FCC Consumer Advisory

VoIP and 9-1-1 Service

The ability to access emergency services by dialing 9-1-1 is a vital component of public safety and emergency preparedness. Recent reports of consumers' inability to access life-saving emergency services while using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services that allow the consumer to place calls like traditional telephone service have highlighted a critical public safety gap. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has taken steps to close this gap by imposing Enhanced 9-1-1 (E9-1-1) obligations, effective by the end of 2005, on providers of these "interconnected" VoIP services. E9-1-1 systems automatically provide a 9-1-1 caller's call back number and, in many cases, location information to emergency service personnel.

What Is Interconnected VoIP Service?

Interconnected VoIP service allows you to make and receive calls to and from traditional phone numbers using a high-speed (broadband) Internet connection (*i.e.*, DSL, Cable Modem, Wi-Fi). It can be used in place of traditional phone service. Typically, interconnected VoIP technology works by either placing an adapter between a traditional phone and broadband connection, or by using a special VoIP phone that connects directly to your computer or Internet connection. While you may choose to use interconnected VoIP service from a single location, like a residence, some interconnected VoIP services can be used wherever you travel as long as a broadband Internet connection is available.

The Public Safety Challenges of VoIP Services

Traditional phone services have always associated a particular number with a fixed address. Because certain interconnected VoIP services can be used from virtually any broadband connection, the location of the caller cannot automatically be determined like it is for "traditional" phone services. In much the same way that you can access e-mail from most any connection, portable interconnected VoIP services enable consumers to take their home or business phone service almost anywhere.

This portability raises a number of challenges to the emergency services community. The FCC has recently taken action to make sure that emergency calls from these VoIP services will get through to the appropriate public safety authorities, but there are certain things that consumers need to be aware of.

When you call 9-1-1 from a "traditional" telephone, the call in most cases is sent to emergency service providers who are responsible for helping people in a particular



geographic area or community. These emergency service providers often can automatically identify your location and direct the closest emergency personnel to that location. They also often can automatically identify your telephone number so that they can call you back if you are disconnected accidentally.

Interconnected VoIP services pose public safety challenges that the new rules will address. The FCC is working to alleviate the risks to public safety posed by interconnected VoIP services by requiring the following, effective by the end of 2005:

- All interconnected VoIP providers must automatically provide E9-1-1 services to all customers as a standard, mandatory feature without customers having to specifically request this service. VoIP providers may not allow their customers the option to “opt-out” of E9-1-1 service.
- Before interconnected VoIP service providers can activate a new customer’s service, providers must obtain from the customer the physical location at which the service will first be used so that emergency services personnel will be able to locate callers who dial 9-1-1. Interconnected VoIP providers must also provide one or more easy ways for all customers to update the physical location they have registered with the provider, if it changes.
- Interconnected VoIP providers must transmit **all** 9-1-1 calls, as well as a callback number and the caller’s registered physical location, to the appropriate emergency services call center or local emergency authority.
- Interconnected VoIP providers must take appropriate action to ensure that their customers have a clear understanding of the limitations, if any, of their E9-1-1 service. All providers must specifically advise new and existing subscribers, prominently and in plain language, the circumstances under which E911 service may not be available through the interconnected VoIP service or may be in some way limited by comparison to traditional E911 service. They must distribute labels to all subscribers warning subscribers if E911 service may be limited or not available and instructing the subscriber to place them on and/or near the equipment used in conjunction with the interconnected VoIP service.
- In some areas, emergency service providers are not capable of receiving or processing the location information or call back number that is automatically provided with E9-1-1 calls. In those areas, interconnected VoIP service providers must ensure that the call is routed to the appropriate public safety answering point.

Tips for VoIP Subscribers

If you have or are thinking of subscribing to an interconnected VoIP service, you should:

- Be sure to provide your accurate physical address to your interconnected VoIP service provider to ensure that emergency services can be quickly dispatched to your location.



- Be familiar with your interconnected VoIP service provider's procedures for updating your address and promptly update address information in the event of a change.
- Make sure you have a clear understanding of any limitations of your 9-1-1 service.
- Inform children, babysitters, and visitors about your interconnected VoIP service and its 9-1-1 limitations, if any.
- If the power is out or your broadband connection is down, be aware that your interconnected VoIP service may also be out. Consider installing a backup power supply, maintaining a traditional phone line and analog phone as a backup, or having a cellular phone as a backup.
- While the new rules won't be effective immediately, we expect that some providers will implement solutions sooner. You should check with your provider of choice if you have service now or initiate it before the rules take effect.

For Further Information

For more information about interconnected VoIP and 9-1-1 or about VoIP in general, see <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/VoIP.html> or www.fcc.gov/cgb/voip911order.pdf. You can also contact the FCC's Consumer Call Center at 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322), or a TTY telephone call to 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322).

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